

You're not gone

"My confession won't suffice

There is too much life left in your eyes."

Est

The shutter clicks. Another plate of noodles. Another influencer pouting at the camera. Another "artisanal" coffee cup held at the perfect angle for the 'gram.

I adjust the light, move the reflector, click again. The restaurant owner hovers, nervous. "Is it good? Does it look delicious?"

"It looks exactly like the food." I say, which is technically true and completely meaningless.

He beams, not hearing the exhaustion in my voice.

My camera bag feels like it's full of bricks. My back aches from hauling the light stand up three flights of stairs for a bakery that wanted "natural light, but better." I've taken 247 photos today. I will delete 200 of them. The remaining 47 will be technically fine and emotionally dead. This is what I used to do before I met William. Before I learned that photography could be a conversation, not just a transaction. Before I saw my own soul reflected in charcoal lines on a canvas.

Now I'm back to the transaction. And I'm good at it. The clients are happy. The magazines pay on time. My portfolio is full of shiny, perfect, empty images.

It's easier this way.

Easier than sitting in the studio with Tui, who looks at me with those sad, knowing eyes like he can see the hole William left in my chest. Easier than explaining to Hong why I flinch when his phone buzzes. Easier than admitting that I fell in love with a ghost who promised he wouldn't disappear and then did.

The last shot is a cocktail. I get the condensation perfect. The owner pays me in cash, counting out the bills slowly like I might steal from him.

I walk home. The city is loud and I don't take a single photo. My camera stays in the bag, heavy and silent.

The days seem to merge together.

I threw myself into the work. Anything to keep my mind busy. Anything to feel like I was moving instead of standing still, watching everything I'd built crumble. I booked shoots for influencers who wanted "authentic" but meant "naked on a rooftop." I photographed food that looked like it was about to crawl off the plate. I shot portraits of people who smiled too wide, eyes too wide, trying to sell a life they

didn't live.

It was the same as before. The same grind. The same soul-crushing monotony.

But this time, I didn't care.

I didn't care about the pay. I didn't care about the clients. I didn't care about the art.

I just cared about the noise. The distraction. The way the flash kept pulling me out of the memories that were trying to pull me under.

I showed up at Ink & Ashes. Not because I needed to. Because I wanted to. Because the studio was the only place that still felt like mine.

The studio door slammed shut behind me, the echo bouncing off the sterile white walls. I didn't look up. Didn't pause. Just dropped my camera bag on the counter and started unpacking.

Memory cards. Lens caps. Tripod legs. Filters. I moved like a machine—efficient, emotionless, already halfway into the next shot.

Tui was at his station, staring at his screen. He looked tired. Bags under his eyes. Hair a mess. He'd texted me three times this week.

Tui: Hey, you okay?

Tui: Want to grab coffee?

Tui: Est, call me.

I'd read the messages. Ignored them. Deleted them.

I couldn't deal with Tui right now. Not with the way he looked at me—those wide, concerned eyes, like I was a broken camera he didn't know how to fix.

Hong was in the back room, probably sketching something that looked like a pile of spaghetti. I could hear the soft scratch of his pencil. He'd been watching me too. Not with Tui's worry, but with that quiet, analytical curiosity of his. He'd said something last week—"You're acting like a ghost around here." I'd brushed it off. Ghost was better than what I actually was.

Tui tried. God, Tui tried. He'd ask about the new shoots. Offer to help with edits. Make jokes about the influencers. But every time he looked at me, I saw it—the pity. The worry. The unspoken "What happened?"

I couldn't tell him. I couldn't tell anyone.

Because if I said it out loud—if I admitted that I was heartbroken over a boy I barely knew, that I'd let myself fall for someone who didn't even know how to stay—I'd

have to face what was really happening.

That I was unraveling. That I was hiding. That I was running.

I'd think about William.

About the way he'd looked at me, like I was something rare and breakable. About the way he'd said "You saw me." About the way he'd kissed me, soft and hesitant, like he was afraid I'd disappear if he moved too fast.

And then I'd think about Tui.

About the way he'd held me when I was a mess after my father kicked me out. About the way he'd believed in my photography when I didn't believe in myself. About the way he'd said "You're not a failure." About the way he'd said "You're worth loving."

And I'd feel the guilt.

Because I was ignoring him. Avoiding him. Pretending he didn't exist because I couldn't deal with the weight of his care.

And I'd think about Hong. About the way he'd said "You're not broken." About the way he'd said "You're just... hurt."

And I'd feel the shame.

Because I was hiding from them too. Pretending I didn't need them. Pretending I didn't want them. Pretending I didn't long for them.

I was choking on the silence.

The silence between me and Tui.

The silence between me and Hong.

The silence between me and William.

I was drowning in the noise of work, the clatter of cameras, the hum of lights, the endless cycle of clients and shoots and deadlines.

But underneath it all, there was a void. A void left by William. A void that felt like it was pulling me apart.

And I was letting it.

Because I was afraid.

Afraid to admit I was heartbroken. Afraid to admit I was lonely. Afraid to admit I was lost.

And so I kept moving. Kept working. Kept pretending.

It's late, past midnight.

I drop my bag by the door, kick off my shoes, and collapse onto the small sofa we keep in the corner. I press my face into the cushion and scream, just a little.

My phone buzzes. I don't look. I know who it isn't.

I check anyway. Because I'm a masochist. Because maybe this time.

No new messages. No missed calls. Just the last exchange, sitting there like an accusation.

I close my eyes and see him. The way he looked at me in that first day. The portrait he painted. The kiss that felt like coming home. The way he said he didn't want to be alone anymore.

I believed him. I believed in the possibility of him.

And now I'm photographing soup for a living because it's easier than admitting that I spent three weeks falling for someone who doesn't know how to stay.

The phone buzzes again. This time, I look.

Tui: You alive?

Me: Barely.

Tui: Come downstairs. I have wine.

Me: I'm tired.

Tui: I can see your light on. Don't make me come up there.

I stare at the message. I could ignore it. I could turn off the lights and pretend I'm not here. But the truth is, I'm lonely. So fucking lonely.

Me: Fine.

Tui is sitting on the step of the stairs, two paper cups and a bottle of cheap red wine balanced precariously on his knee. He looks tired. We both do.

"Rough day?" he asks, handing me a cup.

"Rough week." I correct, taking a long sip. It's terrible. Perfect.

"Rough month." he counters.

I don't answer. We sit in silence, listening to the city hum around us. The streetlight casts long shadows across the pavement.

"I don't know how to do this." I say finally, staring into my cup.

"Do what?"

"Pretend I'm fine. Pretend I'm not thinking about him every minute. Pretend that every time my phone buzzes, I don't hope it's him." I laugh, but it sounds like breaking glass. "I barely knew him, Tui. We had one date. A few calls. Why does it hurt this much?"

Tui takes a slow sip of wine. "Because you saw him. Really saw him. And he saw you. That doesn't happen often."

"I want to unsee him."

"You can't."

"I know." I lean my head back against the stair rail. "I just want to understand. Why would he let me in that far, show me that much, and then just... stop?"

Tui is quiet for a long time. When he speaks, his voice is gentle. "People like William, people who've been hurt, they don't know how to do the middle part. The part where you keep choosing someone every day. They know how to hide, and they know how to dive. But the steady swim? That's terrifying."

"He said he didn't want to be alone anymore."

"Maybe he meant it. Maybe he still means it." Tui looks at me, his eyes dark and serious. "But wanting something and being able to have it are different things. He's learning. Or he's failing. Or he's just... stuck."

"Stuck." I repeat. The word tastes like ash.

"Yeah." Tui nudges my shoulder with his. "And you're stuck waiting. Which is why you're photographing influencers and crying in stairwells."

"I'm not crying."

"You will be."

He's right. The tears are already there, hot and stupid. I wipe them away with the back of my hand.

"I just wanted it to work." I whisper. "I wanted to be enough."

"You are enough," Tui says fiercely. "You are more than enough. You are exactly what someone should be looking for. But you can't make him see that. He has to choose to see it."

"And if he doesn't?"

Tui is quiet again. He pours more wine into my cup. "Then you keep taking pictures. Not for the magazines. Not for the money. But for you. You find the thing that makes you feel alive again, and you hold onto it. And maybe, eventually, you stop waiting for his text and start texting yourself."

I laugh, wet and shaky. "That's terrible advice."

"It's the only advice I have." He leans his head on my shoulder. "I'm here, I'm not going anywhere. Even when you're being a ghost."

I rest my head on top of his. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just... come back. When you're ready."

We sit there until the wine is gone and the city starts to quiet down. I don't feel better, exactly. But I feel less alone.

The next morning, I wake up to a notification. Not from William. From a new client. A fashion brand. They saw my food photography. They want me to shoot their summer collection. I stare at the message. At the rates they're offering. At the opportunity. Then I look at my camera bag, sitting by the door where I dropped it.

I pick it up. The weight is familiar. Solid.

I don't open the client's email.

Instead, I pull out my camera, walk to the window, and take a picture of the morning light hitting the building across the street. Not for a client. Not for money. Just because it's beautiful. Just because I'm still here.

William's name on my phone still haunted me.

He hadn't answered to any of my messages, Not the one that said "I miss you." Not the one that said "We need to talk." Not the one that said "I'm sorry."

I'd read them all. Stared at them until the words blurred into meaningless shapes. Then I'd locked my phone in my bag and pretended they didn't exist.

He barely knew me. We'd only spent one afternoon together. But that afternoon had cracked something open in me. A feeling I hadn't felt since I was sixteen, when I first realized I wasn't like the other boys. When I realized I didn't want a girlfriend—

just someone who saw me, and didn't flinch.

William had seen me. And now he was gone. And I was drowning in the wake.

Absence.

The mattress feels too hard, too empty beneath me. My apartment is silent, the only sound the low, rhythmic thrum of the city struggling to wake up beneath the layer of concrete and steel. It's mid-morning, the light filtering in weakly through the dusty window, but I'm still in bed, fully dressed in yesterday's clothes.

I lay there, my body aching with a kind of fatigue that sleep can't touch. My shoulders are bruised from the strap of the heavy equipment suitcase I've been lugging through twelve different cafés this week. My eyes burn from the artificial ring lights and the vapid smiles of influencers I've spent ten hours a day capturing.

I took the jobs to drown the silence. I took them so I wouldn't have to look at Tui's pitying face or Hong's silent, searching eyes. But here, in the dark, the work doesn't matter. The noise stops, and the void opens up.

William's last text sits on my screen, mocking me with its brevity:

William: I'm going to do better.

That was days ago. Before the silence. Before the cold stop.

Was everything I got from William fake?

He came to me like a warm breeze in a stifling city. Like a story I desperately needed to read. He was different. He saw past the camera, past the hunger for published work, and saw the kid who ran away from home with a chipped camera body. He saw the desperation, and instead of flinching, he offered a hand.

The question is a jagged piece of glass in my throat. I replay that afternoon in his penthouse. The smell of jasmine tea. The way he looked at the painting of me—that raw, charcoal version of my soul. The way his hands felt on my waist. That wasn't the behavior of a man who was lying.

There was no reason for him to stop talking.

If there was a reason, what was it? Did I push too hard? Did I confess my own fear of abandonment too readily, showing him the weakness he was trying to escape?

It's the same script. The same devastating climax I've seen play out in every connection that ever mattered to me. They open up, they let you in, you feel that dizzying, terrifying hope that maybe, finally, this one is different. And then, when the vulnerability becomes too real, too heavy, they retreat back into the fortress

they built. It's the same thing I saw from everyone who left me. My father, turning cold the moment he discovered who I loved. The fleeting friends who vanished once they realized my life wasn't glamorous enough for their social circles. Seeing me as something easy to abandon. Something conditional. Even the clients I shoot now—they use my eyes to make themselves look beautiful, and then they walk away without knowing my name.

Has he gone back to how he was before meeting me?

The William I knew for those first glorious two weeks felt like a breakthrough. The shy boy who let me see the unfinished painting, who kissed me like he was trying to memorize my face before it vanished. That William felt real.

I imagine him now, locked in that beautiful, sterile penthouse. Is the door locked three times again? Is he sitting in the dark, staring at the city, preferring the "absence" he told me he wanted to capture? I wonder if meeting me changed anything for him at all. He told me he didn't want to be alone anymore. He dared to kiss me. He dared to let me see his mess. Was that a breakthrough, or just a lapse in judgment that he's now correcting with silence?

Because I know what the change felt like in me.

Before William, I was a series of quick cuts and fast movements. I was always running, always trying to prove I was worth the space I occupied. But when I was with him, the shutter slowed down. I felt a stillness I hadn't found within myself for years. I felt like I could stop running and just... be.

Had there been a change in him after meeting me?

Yes. Definitely.

There was the day he kissed me—a pure, unadulterated moment of yes. There was the day he talked about his mother, letting me in on the deepest part of his wound. There was the painting of me, charcoal on canvas, seeing past the lens to the man underneath.

And then there was Lego.

That memory stings worse than William's silence. The interruption. The sudden, heavy atmosphere in the penthouse when Lego walked in, bright and innocent, holding those magnificent flowers. The way William's entire body tightened, his hand shooting out to gently push Lego away, his voice laced with that sharp, uncomfortable urgency: "I'm busy right now. Can we reschedule?"

He was protecting us. Protecting the nascent bubble of 'him and Est' by sacrificing his connection with Lego.

And I let him do it. That's the part that claws at me now. I stayed silent. I focused on



the kiss, on my own excitement, on the beautiful portrait, and I let that sharp dismissal happen right in front of me. I didn't offer a word to Lego. I didn't check on them later. I was so drunk on William's attention that I became complicit in his carelessness.

I hated William for being careless, but I hated myself more for letting it pass.

If I could be so easily blinded by my own wanting that I ignore someone else's pain, what does that say about me? What does that mean for the future? If William starts relying on me as his sole source of light, will I eventually get tired of holding that weight? Will I eventually need to retreat too? Will I become the person who demands Tui be gentle with me, but forgets to be gentle with Lego?

I roll onto my side, pulling the pillow over my head, trying to muffle the noise of my own conscience.

How did I feel that change within myself?

When William kissed me, it wasn't just desire; it was validation. It was proof that after years of being told I was too needy, too emotional, too much—that someone could look at all that raw hunger and not turn away. That my need felt like a comfort to him, not a burden. But that confidence, that fragile sense of belonging, feels shaky now that he's retreated. I thought seeing me made him brave enough to step out. Instead, it seems to have made him retreat back into his shell, taking me with him, and leaving everyone else outside.

I get out of bed. The floor is cold. I can't just wait for his text. I can't go back to being the guy who silently accepts the crumbs of attention because I'm terrified of the full meal leading to a bigger loss.

I grab my keys. I grab my jacket. I need motion. I need sharp, technical focus to drown out the soft, aching questions in my heart.

I won't go to William's. Not yet. I need to remember who I am when I'm not just "William's new person."

I head to the studio. Tui will be there, immersed in the methodical focus of his work. Hong will be sketching something that makes a quiet statement. And maybe, just maybe, I can pick up my camera, point it at something objective—a perfectly arranged still life, a clean line, a sharp edge—and remember that my value isn't conditional on William's next text message.

It's not about him going back to how he was before. It's about me refusing to go back to how I was before him.

I need to be the one who chooses consistency, even when it's hard. I need to be the one who reaches out, even if I might get burned.

I pull on my shoes. The adrenaline starts to kick in—the familiar energy that fuels my best work. It's better than the paralyzing fear. I'm going to the studio. I'm going to work until my fingers ache. And when William finally texts again, I need to have an answer ready that isn't just "Okay." I need to have an answer that reminds him—and reminds me—what I actually want. And what I deserve.

The orange glow of the sunset was bruising the sky by the time I reached the street where Ink & Ashes sat.

The sky outside looks wrong. Not wrong as in ugly—wrong as in late. Wrong as in I've lost hours without noticing. Orange light clings to the buildings like melted honey, and the shadows on the sidewalk are long enough to trip over. I'd meant to come earlier. I'd meant to talk to Tui. To sit in the studio's warm light and let the smell of antiseptic and ink pull me back into my body. Instead, I spent most of the day in bed, lamenting like a ghost in my own apartment. I hadn't realized how much time had slipped through my fingers. I'd spent the entire day paralyzed in bed, staring at the ceiling, dissecting every moment with William until the memories felt like frayed threads. The daylight had come and gone while I lamented, and now the city was settling into that restless, golden hour where shadows stretch too long and everything feels a little more fragile.

I slowed my pace as I neared the studio. I wasn't ready for questions yet.

Then, I saw them.

Tui is standing half outside, half inside, holding it with one hand. He's smiling—an actual smile, not the polite client smile, not the strained "I'm fine" smile. His posture is relaxed in a way I haven't seen in weeks. his frame silhouetted against the warm light spilling out from the shop. He was laughing—a genuine, easy sound that reached me even from half a block away.

He was saying goodbye to Hong, who looked effortlessly cool in his university clothes, Not the studio version of Hong in plain clothes and quiet eyes, hair like silver thread catching the sunset. His sketchbook is tucked under one arm, and his other hand is holding something rectangular—probably his latest painting.

And then I see the second figure next to him.

Lego.

My steps slow without permission.

Lego stands a little behind Hong, smaller by instinct as much as height, like he's learned to take up less space so nobody has to make room for him. His hair is in a half-ponytail today, the rest spilling down his back in waves so glossy it makes my

stomach twist with envy. Even from here I can tell he's wearing something carefully chosen—black, neat, a little shiny at the collar. He looks up at Tui and Hong with a soft, that makes my throat go tight. Not jealousy. Not exactly. More like watching warmth happen from the outside. Like someone standing by a window looking in.

I freeze on the sidewalk, a few meters away. I don't go closer. I don't want to interrupt. Not this.

Tui laughs at something Hong says. It's brief, but real. Hong's mouth twitches—almost a smile, almost shy. Lego shifts his weight, hugging his bag strap, gaze flicking away like he's embarrassed. Hong was saying something, gesturing toward Lego and Lego was nodding, his eyes bright, his face turned upward toward Hong like a flower seeking the last of the sun. Tui reached out and patted Lego's shoulder, a gesture of deep, protective affection.

It was a lovely moment. A perfect, quiet tableau of people who actually showed up for each other. I felt like an intruder watching a life I didn't know how to live anymore. If I walked up now, I'd just be the gray cloud in their golden hour. I'd be the one with the heavy heart and the unanswered messages, reminding them that William was still a ghost and I was still a wreck.

Hong steps down from the studio threshold first. Tui says something low to him, and Hong nods, their shoulders brushing as Hong turns to go. Lego follows half a step behind, eyes down, careful.

For one second, Lego's gaze lifts and meets mine across the distance.

It's too fast to read fully, but I catch it anyway: surprise, a flicker of guardedness, then something like recognition. The look of someone who's been through enough to know a wounded person when he sees one.

Then Lego looks away.

They keep walking.

I waited until Hong and Lego turned the corner, their laughter fading into the hum of the evening traffic. My gait felt heavy, my boots scuffing the pavement as I approached the door. My camera bag, usually a comfort, felt like a lead weight.

Tui was still leaning against the doorframe, watching the spot where they'd disappeared, a lingering smile on his face. When he heard my footsteps, he turned.

The smile didn't vanish, but it shifted. It went from light to careful. From easy to observant. Tui could read me better than anyone, and I knew I looked exactly how I felt: like someone who had spent ten hours rotting in bed.

"Hey." he said softly, his voice a warm rumble in the cool evening air.

"Hey." I managed. I stopped a few feet away, my hands shoved deep into my pockets.

Tui didn't ask where I'd been. He didn't ask why I looked like a ghost. He just looked up at the orange-tinged sky, then back at me.

I swallow. My voice comes out rough. "It's... late."

"You okay?"

I want to lie. I want to say fine. I want to make a joke about traffic or clients or how the sky looks like it's on fire.

Instead, I just stand there, heavy.

"No." I admit.

Tui's hand tightens on the doorframe. "Come in."

I step forward, but my legs feel like they've been filled with sand. Every movement is effort. I cross the threshold and the familiar scent hits me—antiseptic, ink, faint incense. Home, in the only way a place you work can become home.

I glance back once.

The street is still orange. Hong and Lego are gone.

"Were you—" I start, then stop, because my throat tightens and I don't know what I'm asking. Were you with them? Is Lego okay? Why do I feel like I'm watching everyone else move forward while I stay stuck?

Tui closes the door behind me gently, like he knows loud sounds might shatter me. "Hong wanted to show me a painting." he says.

I nod, pretending it's nothing.

Tui looks at me for a long moment. His eyes soften again, but this time it's directed at me.

"You've been in bed all day." he says, not a question.

Heat rises behind my eyes. "How do you—"

"I know you." he says simply. "And you look like someone who hasn't eaten anything but thoughts."

I let out a shaky breath that could be a laugh if it tried harder. "I didn't mean to waste the day."

"You didn't waste it." Tui says, but his voice is careful.

That sentence hits harder than it should.

I set my camera bag down by the counter. My hands linger on the strap like I don't know what to do without it.

The sky outside keeps turning darker, orange slipping toward purple.

I realize I've lost an entire day to waiting for a person who isn't speaking.

And standing here, in the quiet warmth of the studio, with Tui watching me like he's refusing to let me disappear, I finally feel the first crack of something else under the grief. Not hope. Not yet.

But movement. A small step forward.

Even if it's late. Even if I'm heavy.

Even if I don't know how to stop missing someone who felt like a dream.

"I saw." I whispered. "From back there. I didn't want to interrupt."

Tui's eyes gentled. He stepped back, pulling the door open wider, an invitation into the only place that ever felt safe when the world went dark.

"You're never an interruption, Est," I felt the ice in my chest start to thaw, just a little. "Come in. I'll make more coffee."

I followed him into the scent of ink and antiseptic, leaving the dying sunlight behind. I was tired of being alone with my thoughts, and as much as I wanted to run, I knew Tui was the only one who could help me carry the weight of everything William hadn't said.